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ENGLISH HISTORY, LITERATURE, ACHÆOLOGICAL, ETC.

THE HISTORICAL AND MISCELLANEOUS
LITERATURE OF QUEBEC

1764 to 1830

By BENJAMIN SULTE

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VII.—*The Historical and Miscellaneous Literature of Quebec—
1764 to 1830.*

By BENJAMIN SULTE.

(Read June 23rd, 1897.)

The literature of all nations began with poetry, or, at least, with versification, and the form of song is generally the first to appear. Such was the case amongst the French Canadian people.

Their settlement on this side of the ocean is altogether confined to the period of 1633-1680, when books were rather scarce throughout Europe, especially in country places, and it is well known that Canada received only few families from towns and cities at that time. Curious enough, though most of the women who came during those fifty years could read and write, and before thirty of them were here, they had a school open for girls. The men, as a rule, were indifferent in that line of business.

The literary knowledge imported by that little group of toilers of the soil was merely the popular current songs of the northern and north-western (Brittany sent no settlers to Canada) parts of France, where they came from, but they were songsters themselves, and all loved to sing and to play some kind of musical instruments. It is still one of the most remarkable features of that race.

The fur trade started about the same date as colonization, and the "habitant," or actual settler, soon got interested in that new life. The songs of old France were carried to the Great Lakes; they passed afterwards to the Mississippi and the Northwest plains, where they are to be found nowadays, wherever the French Canadians have penetrated through this continent. Their number is immense. One would think that if he knows the series of those that have been printed in book form or other publications he has nothing more to learn in that direction, but every week will bring to his ear a fresh supplement of that inexhaustible stock.

A people who is given to such culture may be expected to produce many works of merit, and stamp them with its own peculiar mark, as, for instance, the characteristic traits belonging to a colony. We could here mention what several high critics in modern France have said about the literary capacities of the French Canadians, but the compliments paid to the latter only reflect on the present writers, and the critics referred to have never read any of our productions previous to 1850.

We wish to draw attention to even an older period, that of 1764-1830, the very infancy of our small literary world. The germs that existed in the domain of the song-makers of the 17th and 18th centuries have only

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disease prevailing at Bay Saint Paul. A volume devoted to "La Sainte Famille" came out of the press of Mesplet in 1787.

A large book printed in London, 1784, but written by a Canadian, has a special history in the events of those days. The author, Pierre Ducalvet, was just out of the hands of Governor Haldimand when he issued his "Appel à la Justice," which is a criticism of the administration of the colony, rather personal, somewhat excessive also, but an invaluable record of certain facts connected with the state of Canada during the American Revolution.

In 1788 Mesplet launched *La Gazette Littéraire* at the request of a certain number of Montreal gentlemen. The same year, James Tanswell started *Le Courrier de Québec*, but only issued two numbers of that publication.

A public library was opened at Quebec in 1785, and was a far more serious undertaking, for it kept well for a long period of years. There was decidedly a movement towards three or four branches of studies since peace had been restored to the country. Dramatic associations existed in Montreal and Quebec. They played Molière and some light comedies of the time of Louis XV. The man who seems to have inspired principally these efforts was Joseph Quesnel, a poet, a musician, and a person of good society. His comedy, *Colas et Colinette*, became the great attraction of the day in Montreal (1790), whilst the people of Quebec boasted of a troop of amateurs who could not be surpassed in any colony, as they believed. His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent, accompanied by lieutenant-governors Clarke and Simcoe attended the performance of *la comtesse d'Escarbagna* and *le Médecin malgré lui* in Quebec, on the 18th February, 1792. The Prince had arrived there during the previous summer and felt quite at home amongst the lively Quebecers. He was present at the banquet given on the 29th December, 1791, to celebrate the granting of a new political constitution to Canada, and, as a matter of course, he heard several songs composed for the occasion, including two specially prepared to welcome him, and which MM. Baby and Amiot rendered in a most happy manner.

There was a spirit of literature in the air. Canadian pamphlets could be seen in the hands of many who had never experienced that sort of pleasure before. *Papiers sur l'Angleterre* referred to the administration of the United Kingdom, and such reading was apropos of our new constitution. A long letter from Bishop Bailly upon the necessity of a university gave rise to discussion and meditation. *L'ancienne et la nouvelle constitution du Canada* is another commentary of a political importance, but indicating also that the Canadians were able to express their ideas before the world. *La nouvelle constitution de France* followed the above, and the whole province roused to listen to this display of opinions. To crown the whole came *Le Magasin de Québec*, a repertory of literature and science. The *Quebec Gazette* also modified its old dull

system and opened the door to several communications concerning the questions of the day. That coincided with the creation of *The Upper Canada Gazette*, published at Newark in 1790.

Contrary to what is generally believed, books were not unknown to the French population of the colony during the second half of the 18th century. It is stated that there were at least 60,000 volumes in the private libraries about the year 1765, and many others were received after that date; so that we may fairly say that there was one volume for every soul of the population in the province. Any one conversant with the habits of the best families of the period in question understand readily that those people were educated not only in manners and outside politeness, but equally by reading and by that practice of conversation and "*causerie de salon*" which is so much French—a great school for learning what you have not yet gathered from books. The literature of the reigns of Louis XIV. and Louis XV. (1660 to 1760), therefore, composed the main elements of a Canadian library by the end of the 18th century. Its influence is visible on every page written in those days, either for the public press or in private letters. We know, besides, nearly all the books then to be found in Canada, because a great many of them have been preserved by the descendants of the owners and handed down to us.

At the outbreak of the French Revolution a movement was noticeable amongst the politicians in France to favour "the English system of government," in other words, the constitutional administration, but this could not be made clear for the masses, unless some written explanations be furnished. A lawyer by the name of De Lolme (a French Swiss) seems to have sounded the correct note, and his work became classical at its first edition. No sooner had a copy of it been received in Canada, than the members of the Legislative Assembly, who were forty-two French speaking men out of a total of fifty, turned their attention to that Alcoran, but as the session was drawing near to its end, it was thought better to arrange for a series of meetings in Quebec, Three Rivers, Sorel, Chambly and Montreal, where the members could gather by small detachments and examine the "book of revelations" at ease. This was done, and it produced a good effect, inasmuch as it allowed some practical information to make its way through the heads of our representative men.

The spirit of the times is indicated by the insertion in the *Quebec Gazette* of several articles clipped from Parisian newspapers, and all necessarily of a "high tone" at that hour, when the Convention reigned supreme at Paris. We dare say no French Canadian publication would have been allowed to do the same thing. Such was again the spirit of the times. A French Canadian could not be otherwise than a bad subject!

The Duke of La Rochefoucauld, who visited Upper Canada in 1795, says that the people there were not so eager for news as the inhabitants

of the United States. "The only paper in the province is printed at Newark, and the government covers the three-quarters of its expenses for want of subscription from the public. It is a weekly paper containing very short extracts from the New York and Albany publications, and all in the views of Governor Simcoe. In brief, its usefulness is that of an official gazette."

La Rochefoucauld adds that the *Upper Canada Gazette* had no subscriber in Kingston, but that the *Quebec Gazette* had two there!

The first serious agitation in favour of liberty of the press in England only dates from 1795, when the following toast was drunk at a Whig dinner: "To the liberty of the press, without which we could not breathe."

From 1764 to 1795 no less than thirty works were printed in the province, and about ten others in London, but written by Canadians. For a moment these figures may be considered meagre; we wonder if it is any better in our own days, comparing the increase of the population. Sciences proper were much neglected, and continued to be so for fifty years afterwards.

William Smith, who lived at Quebec in 1785, says that a public library was established there in that year, and that the books came from London. La Rochefoucauld (1795) observes that the only library of that kind in Lower Canada was at Quebec. "It is a small gathering of books and nearly all French, sustained by subscription. We are rather puzzled at the choice of some of them, knowing, as we do, the political dispositions of the directors of the institution, for it contains the printed papers of the National Assembly of France." As late as 1824, Vassal de Monviel speaks of the interesting searches made by him in the Quebec library, which is supposed to be either that of 1785 or the one belonging to the legislature. By that time, 1824, schools had been opened in several localities, and the Nicolet college was in a first-class state of activity, as well as the Quebec and Montreal colleges. Reverend Dr. Jacob Mountain wrote some remarkable letters (1798-1801) in which he proposed a plan of public education for all classes.

The agitation which followed the discovery of the Genest scheme to drag the United States into a war against Great Britain was marked by various publications, it seems, but two only are known to us: "Extract from Minutes of Council containing His Majesty's late Regulations, &c., Quebec, 1798;" "Avis au Canada à l'occasion de la crise importante actuelle, Québec, 1798."

Joseph François Perreault was the champion of elementary schools at the end of the last century. In 1803 he published a treaty of parliamentary practice; in 1803 a dictionary of the same nature; in 1813 a hand-book for the bailiffs; in 1822 a course of elementary education; in 1824 extracts from the judgments of the prevotal court from 1727 to 1759; in

1830 a work on large and small agricultural pursuits; in 1831 a plan of general education; then closed his career by a history of Canada from the discovery.

François Joseph Cugnet, the best French legist from 1760 to 1789, published five or six treatises concerning law matters; Justin McCarthy, a French lawyer, gave an excellent dictionary of the old civil code of Canada (1809); William Vondenvelden, a French engineer, and Louis Charland, issued a compilation, being a sequel to Cugnet; same year, Jean Antoine Bouthillier published an arithmetic for the schools. Several other names must be omitted here for want of space.

The *Quebec Gazette*, as a rule, refrained from attacking the French Canadians, and this was considered a lack of patriotic energy on the part of that paper by parties who wished to keep up a lively skirmishing against that population. The *Mercury* came to light in January, 1805, ready to open fire on the whole line. It soon found an occasion to satisfy its desire. Pierre Bedard, the leader of the French Canadian party in the Legislative Assembly, laid a motion before the speaker to inquire as to the author, printer, &c., of the *Montreal Gazette*, who had published, April 1st, 1805, a "false, scandalous and malicious libel, highly and unjustly reflecting upon His Majesty's representatives in this province." The editor and the printer were accordingly ordered to be taken into the custody of the sergeant-at-arms, but not being found by those who went to Montreal in quest of them, the matter was dropped. The *Mercury* then came to the front trying to throw upside down the party forming the majority of the Legislative Assembly, but the sergeant-at-arms being sent to the editor, this gentleman apologized and was released. Later on, the House objected to another article from the same source, and Mr. Thomas Cary could not be found, because he had concealed himself in a secret room in his own house, from where he continued the fight in each number of the *Mercury*. Mr. Bedard finally saw that his action was against the liberty of the press, and abandoned the proceedings.

A new political organ was launched at Quebec in November, 1806, under the title *Le Canadien*, with a full programme for a constitutional government. This paper contained a series of historical documents referring to Canada, which was a new phase in the journalism of the province, and also numerous original literary productions. The *Mercury* went for its neighbour, and they had a long spell of cross-firing on the administration of public affairs.

In literature *Le Canadien* did very well. It is visible that its contributors were men of knowledge gifted with talent. From that moment the French writers of Canada have always formed a group in regular activity, and their development has been a constant fact until the present day.

The *Mercury* had adopted against *Le Canadien* a policy of insinuation. When the latter, for instance, entered into a criticism of the

doings of Napoleon, its neighbour would declare that the object was to blind the readers, because the material with which the paper was printed had been furnished by General Tarreau, the French ambassador at Washington. The poor *Canadien* replied that its shabby appearance was not indicative of the munificence of a great prince, and we know how miserable he looked, but this was considered by his rival as another piece of duplicity.

Two or three of the contributors to *Le Canadien* were rather witty. "Light, headed men," said *The Mercury*.

"With goose-quill armed, instead of spear."

The epigrams flashed in all sorts of ways on both sides for many months. It was a literary exercise that must have afforded the young writers of the period a chance to test their natural resources. Songs were put in circulation, and some of them reflecting on the attitude of the Americans in regard to Canada, for there was a belief all around that the diplomatic difficulty then existing could not be settled except by war.

Let us mention here a book published in Quebec at the beginning of the war of 1812, entitled: "Resources of the Canadas or Sketches of the Physical and Moral Means Which Great Britain and her Colonial Authorities will Successfully Employ in Securing These Valuable Provinces from Open Invasion and Invidious Aggression on the Part of the Government of the United States of America, by A. Querist."

But there was also a French Canadian party called the "office-seekers," (les bureaucrates), which intended to participate in the government patronage. They started a paper, *Le Courrier de Québec*, in Jan., 1807, with Dr. Jacques Labrie as chief editor. Labrie had been educated in Canada; afterwards he had studied medicine in Edinburgh, Scotland, and he was greatly given to matters concerning the history of Canada. His paper opposed *Le Canadien* firmly in politics, and also published several documents relating to the previous thirty years, in connection with our country, but it is not sure whether the intention of Labrie was to counteract the notions spread by *Le Canadien* in the historical field. The purpose of the bureaucrats was more in the direction of securing good government berths for their folks than to indulge in sentiments upon things of old. Labrie, nevertheless, made his mark in the circle of those who were given to literary and historical pursuits.

From that conflict of interest between the *Mercury*, *Canadien* and *Courrier* sprung the practice of advertising the merchants' goods, which the *Quebec Gazette* had always neglected. This is another form of literature not likely to perish, although quite unknown to our forefathers.

When the *Courrier* died, in June, 1807, *Le Canadien* expressed much regret at its departure, stating, in a sarcastic manner, that the best enemy

it could have had was a badly written paper. The *Mercury* was delighted; it said the defunct looked like a parent of *Le Canadien*. In all that squabble, many young men handled the pen and acquired a practical understanding of the art of putting their thoughts in black and white. This was really the first school of that kind in Canada.

Some debating clubs existed in the meantime, where such personalities as Louis J. Papineau, Debartzch and Bourdages gained a fame before coming out openly as public men.

Dr. Labrie gave an impulsion towards the study of the history of Canada. So did George Heriot, in his works published during those years. The Montreal press helped a great deal in that direction by the writings of Viger, Bibaud, Mermet, Saint-George and O'Sullivan. The literature of Canada was born by this time. Lambert, who visited the country in 1806-8, does not say much about it, for he only saw the incipient state of things, and cannot be expected to have foreseen the future. Here are his observations: "The state of literature and the arts did not improve very rapidly after the conquest. The traders and settlers who took up their abode amongst the French were ill-qualified to diffuse a taste for the arts and sciences, unless, indeed, it was the science of barter and the art of gaining cent per cent upon their goods. For many years, no other work was printed in the colony than an almanac... Of late years, the Canadians have appeared desirous of establishing some claim to a literary character... The publishing of six newspapers weekly is a proof of the progressive improvement and prosperity of the country, though it may be but a fallacious symptom of literary improvement. Four of the newspapers are published in Quebec and two in Montreal. These, with an almanac, and the acts of the provincial parliament, are all the works that are printed in Lower Canada." It is obvious that Lambert was unaware of other publications, such as schoolbooks, songsters, treatises upon the seigniorial tenure, commentaries on laws, discussions of political and historical matters, and amateur theatricals, which, in a colony, are always a form of intellectual development worth mentioning. He continues: "Two of the newspapers have been established fifteen or sixteen years; one of them is the *Montreal Gazette*, and the other the *Quebec Gazette*." The *Quebec Gazette* was then 44 years old, and the *Montreal Gazette* 30 years. "They are published in French and English, and contain the governor's proclamation and edicts, the advertisements of the sheriff's sales, merchants' stores, public auctions, &c., together with a selection of the earliest intelligence extracted from the English and American papers... The *Gazettes* seldom interfere with the morals or manners of society; those objects are left for the other weekly papers, which are published on Saturdays and Mondays. These papers consist of the *Quebec Mercury*, published entirely in English, by Cary, on Monday afternoon, and has been established about eight years." Say three years. "The *Canadian Courant*,

also published in English at Montreal every Monday by Nahum Mower, an American from the States, who set up the paper about six years ago. The other papers are wholly French, and have been established since the year 1806. The one called *Le Canadien* is conducted by some disaffected or rather dissatisfied French lawyers and members of the House of Assembly." These men only invoked the application of a constitutional government in the colony, therefore they were reformers, not a set of malcontents for the sake of agitating the public mind, but true patriots, such as were seen afterwards in this country. "It is the only opposition paper in the province; but the 'habitants' either cannot read it, or pay very little attention to the complaints which it contains against the government." How can this be compared with the repeated elections of that remarkable period, by which Sir James Craig's policy was four times disavowed by the people in less than three years? It is visible that Lambert never suspected the existence of an intellectual movement in Canada during his visit, and that not only he derived his information from a clique composed of anti-colonists, but was unable to read French and to appreciate by himself the contents of the newspaper he so candidly stored into the back room. "The writers in *Le Canadien*, however, abused the liberty of the press to such a degree, in the course of the year 1808, that Sir James Craig thought proper to divest some of those gentlemen of the commissions which they held in the French militia, one of whom was a colonel." The reading of the revolutionary articles alluded to by Lambert would make any one of us laugh in 1897, but Sir James was not advancing with the times—far from that! "The other French paper, called *Le Courrier de Québec*, is of very small size, and published every Saturday at two dollars per annum. This little paper is conducted by two or three young French Canadians, for the purpose of inserting their fugitive pieces. These gentlemen have recently established a literary society, which, though it may not contain the talent of a national institute or of a royal society, is, notwithstanding, deserving of all the encouragement that can be given to it by the Canadian government. The first dawn of genius in such a country should be hailed with pleasure." Let us remark that the first dawn of genius is anterior to 1808 in Canada, as already shown in this paper. "The *Mercury* and *Canadian Courant* are devoted to news, and all the various ephemera which usually appear in periodical works of that description. The original essays which appear are merely of a local nature, and are generally the offspring of party disputation, acrimony and slander; and are, of course, generally written in 'wit and sense and nature's spite.'"

"The only public library in Canada is kept at Quebec, in one of the apartments of the bishop's palace." Was that the library of 1785? It looks very much like it.

Sir James Craig having suppressed *Le Canadien* (1810), another periodical was started in Montreal. This time the political feelings were

set aside and *Le Spectateur*, *L'Aurore*, *Le Courrier*, *La Bibliothèque*, *Le Magazin Littéraire*, *L'Observateur*, *L'Encyclopédie*, all published in Montreal (1813-1830), are historical and literary reviews, with a touch of science in them. To complete this series up to 1830, we must mention a large history of Canada and the *Voyages* of Franchère by Michel Bibaud, the valuable works of Jacques Viger, the archaeologist, the poetry of the same Bibaud and J. J. D. Mermet, the classical books of Joseph Bouchette on Canada, the pamphlets of Dr. E. P. Taché on various subjects, the Quebec [and Montreal literary societies, flourishing from 1817 to 1830, and up to the present date. A French critic, M. Le Plée, on visiting the province in 1821, says the rising of its people in the field of intelligence is most remarkable, and exceedingly promising for the future.

The men who first studied the history of this country, commented on the laws and parliamentary practices, composed works for the schools, cultivated poetry and the current art of writing for the public, deserve more gratitude from us than those who came after them, and accomplished marvels, no doubt, but found the way open and new means of development already prepared.

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